

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 5 January 2014 (Epiphany, Year A)
Isa.60.1-6; Ps 72.1-7, 10-14; Eph.3.1-12; Matt.2.1-12 (but using John 1.1-18)

A colleague of mine who describes himself as a spiritual atheist says it sends shivers down his spine, while I suspect that many Christians find it deeply puzzling. I'm not talking about the story of the magi, so if you're expecting gold, frankincense and myrrh this morning, prepare for disappointment. I am referring to the Prologue to the Gospel of St John, which is read at nearly every carol service and which, until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, was recited in a quiet voice by every Catholic priest at the end of the Mass. 'In the beginning was the Word'. I want to preach about it because I never have before. That means that I am going to have to deal with theological issues and also touch on Greek philosophy. If you find that too testing, let your thoughts wander elsewhere for the next quarter of an hour. At least you have been warned.

Actually, we know – if we understand these things, which most of us don't – that in the beginning was the Big Bang: an infinitesimally small and infinitesimally heavy piece of matter which exploded with unimaginable force. Everything that exists in the entire universe owes its being to that moment and the background radiation can still be detected. We do not know what if anything came before it or why it exploded when it did, and it remains a source of wonder that it created the laws of physics as we know them and that at least in this tiny corner of our galaxy, the conditions for sentient life to evolve, all from the same elements as were present from the start. To paraphrase Shakespeare, we are such stuff as stars are made of.

The biblical creation story belongs to a pre-scientific age. Not that people were uninterested in how everything came to be; they simply did not have the tools that modern science has for seeking answers to the big questions. In any case, they were more interested in what life meant rather than how it emerged. The first words of St John's Gospel consciously rewrite the first words of the Hebrew Bible: 'In the beginning God created' and 'In the beginning was the Word'. In the opening chapter of Genesis, God is portrayed as speaking the universe into being: 'And God said 'Let there be light, and there was light'. John includes many elements of this creation

story: God's speech becomes the Word through which all things are created; there is light and there is darkness; life comes into being. But you may have noticed that his account of the beginning is interrupted by another story which brings us firmly down to earth, to a specific time and place: 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light', and so on. But it is not a diversion. It brings into the Prologue the witness of the biblical prophets over the centuries, of whom the Baptist is understood to be the last. The vocation of the prophet is to reveal the gap between God's will and the way his people are living, and to call them to close it. They speak so that God's eternal word is heard in the here and now. Then, in verse 17, John adds a reference to the Law of Moses. So the Prologue to John condenses the whole of the Old Testament - creation, the Law and the Prophets - into a nutshell.

One of its most interesting features is the way John is careful to distinguish verbs of being from verbs of becoming (easier to see in the original Greek). Being belongs to the realm of the eternal, becoming, to the material world, in which things come into being for a little while and are then gone. God was and is and is to be, eternally; whereas we become, are born, and vanish from the ever-changing world. All the verbs about God are verbs of being; all the verbs which tell of creation are verbs of becoming, being made: 'all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made'; and that includes the coming of John the Baptist. The gospel-writer maintains this distinction until in an act of deliberate, even shocking theological vandalism he destroys it in five simple words: *καὶ ὁ λόγος σαρξ ἐγένετο*; 'And the Word became flesh'. The eternal, unchanging creative Word of God does what no Hebrew theologian or Greek philosopher believed it could ever do; it becomes; enters the world of birth and death and dwells (or more literally, 'pitches his tent'), among us.

What is this 'Word' usually written with a capital 'W' to distinguish it from ordinary words? It translates the Greek word 'Logos', which here does not mean words as we use them, but the much deeper philosophical sense of the rational principle governing the universe and making it intelligible. This usage goes back a long way, at least as far as Heraclitus in the sixth century BC. John is doing another bold thing here: he

borrowed an idea which does not come from the Hebrew Bible, although the figure of Wisdom bears some resemblance to it, but from Greek Stoic philosophy. In doing so, he is telling us that human wisdom, even if it comes from a source outside the Scriptures, may be a proper tool to help us understand their meaning. This is an important insight, not least because it answers those who maintain that human wisdom, which in the modern world is largely associated with scientific discovery, has no place in the interpretation of Scripture. The Jewish world in which John was writing had been significantly influenced by Greek thought. Some Jewish thinkers regarded this as contamination; others, like Philo of Alexandria, tried to build bridges between the two. Some early Christian thinkers, notably the hardline Tertullian in the second and third century, rejected all forms of pagan knowledge. ‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ he asked, meaning that all Greek philosophy was darkness compared with the light of divine revelation in Scripture. But others, like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, were much more comfortable in seeking out connections, and it was their view which prevailed.

In many ways, contemporary arguments about the relationship between science and religion occupy the same terrain. John is deliberately borrowing what we would call a secular language, to help us to understand that whatever truths science reveals to us about the nature of our existence, they belong to a rational universe which began in the mind of God. So we could paraphrase the Prologue in these terms: ‘From the outset, the cosmos was a rational creation, with meaning and purpose, and its rationality, meaning and purpose were with God; and they were God’. But why does he engage in such abstract thinking instead of telling us tales of shepherds and wise people?

Where do we come from and what are we doing here? Questions as old as the hills and answers are hard to find. We know much about the physical and biological processes which have brought us and our planet into being, but are we governed by anything other than random chance? You probably don’t spend too much time agonising over such questions, but every now and again they hit us, when we stand on a mountain peak or look up into the night sky, and become aware of our smallness and insignificance, tiny specks of matter which live and die in the briefest of instants

compared to the age of the hills or the vastness of the cosmos. Quite a lot of our contemporaries think that life has no meaning; that it's chaotic and futile. The question I always want to ask them is: do you live as if that were true? They don't, of course. If they did, why would they raise families, make plans, invent daily rituals, lament the state of the world? Einstein famously said: 'the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible'. If there were no rational principles governing it, no Logos, no Word, we would not be able to understand it; and we can. But it's one thing to understand, quite another to know how we should live. It's here that we come to the core of the Prologue to John and to the part that touches us most closely.

John tells us that this creative Word is life, and comes with the power to enlighten. Quakers have always believed in the inner light which every human carries; though this is a belief all Christians share, since Genesis says that we were made in the image and likeness of God. But he also tells us that either we fail to see it or we reject it when it shines among us. We carry on in the darkness, as injustice is piled on injustice in the lust for power and wealth. Even his own people, formed by the Law and called by the prophets, do not receive it when the light shines through the grace and truth of a man called Jesus. John was thinking of some of the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus, though it might just as well apply to all the violence and persecution the Church has condoned across the centuries. But there are those who receive this light, this life, now translated into a language we can understand, the Word expressed not as an idea or a doctrine but as flesh and blood, and subject to all the pain and sorrow of human existence. Such people pass through another kind of birth which is not begun by biological conception but by life from God. That, he proclaims, is the purpose of the Incarnation, this impossible joining of the divine and the human, this divine Word fully embodied in a human life, which reveals the meaning and purpose of the universe, and calls us to live not as those enslaved by the lust for power or hatred or revenge, but as those who become bearers of the light.

You may think that this is a long way from the Magi, the gold and frankincense and myrrh, the baby and his parents. But it is not. For the Magi were searchers after the truth, the scientists of their day. Naturally, when they reached Jerusalem they went

straight to the centre of political power, Herod, with his advisers, to find out where this king is to be born. No doubt they smelled a rat when Herod asked them to return when they had found him. What they discovered must have confounded their expectations, because kings do not usually come into the world in such poor circumstances. We too look for the answers in the wrong places. Politicians cannot tell us how to live creatively, even if they think they can. The task of the scientist is to understand the known universe, not to guide our steps to where justice and peace are enthroned. The answers lie deep within ourselves but can only be found when those dark depths are illumined by the grace and the truth of the Word made flesh. As his Gospel unfolds, John will show how this process works. The unseen Word becomes visible and tangible, but his light is an uncomfortable one and the darkness will rise against him. When John writes in the Prologue that 'we have beheld his glory', he is anticipating the events he will recount. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night because he is in the dark, and is told that he must experience new birth, become a new creation. Eyes that are blind are opened; feet that stumble are set on a firm path; hungry people are fed; the dead are raised. But each time the glory of Christ is shown, there are those who prefer to remain in the darkness. For John, in one of his many paradoxes, that glory will shine most brightly when it appears to have been eclipsed: where most people see a dead man raised on a Cross, John sees the eternal king ascending his throne.

Ideas alone cannot save us from ourselves. We need to see and be touched by the living embodiment of God, the Word who brings all things into being and whose grace and truth have the power to raise us up; here, and now, and always. Amen.